

First responders call for road repair, maintenance funding increase

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A coalition of first responders is calling on Wisconsin lawmakers to increase funding for road repair and maintenance.

In a Capitol news conference Tuesday, first responders said lawmakers need to find solutions so they can more effectively and safely do their jobs.

“We stand here as a united group focused on public safety, and we’re asking the state Legislature to find some common-sense, sustainable solutions to transportation funding,” said Racine Fire Department Lt. Mike DeGarmo.

Gov. Tony Evers Monday said he would be open to paying for road work without increasing a gas tax boost if the funding was sustainable. The gov included an 8-cent gas tax increase in his budget, but legislative Republicans have indicated they will not support the measure and have instead pushed for increased registration, title and heavy truck fees.

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A group of Senate Republicans today was to announce plans to pump more than \$130 million into local road funding, according to sources with knowledge of the plan. The package would be one-time money, taking advantage of new revenue projections the Legislative Fiscal Bureau released last month.

The coalition of first responders did not offer specific policy solutions or endorse any of the proposed revenue generators. Instead, they advocated for a “sustainable” boost to funding in order to improve roads and highways statewide.

Jim Brigham, a Dane County Sheriff’s deputy and a representative from the Wisconsin Professional Police Association, said poor road conditions often lead to

lane closures and accidents that can put first responders in danger.

“Anytime someone is on the side of the road, whether it’s a citizen or a first responder, you’re putting those people’s lives at risk,” Brigham said.

Wisconsin State Patrol Trooper Brandon Ferrell said emergency lane closures caused by poor road conditions often impact his work patrolling highways. He recalled a situation this spring in which a section of I-94 buckled, rendering the busy freeway undrivable.

“They had to close a lane in the middle of the day on a Friday, which is not ideal,” Ferrell said. “The subsequent backup due to that delay caused two more secondary crashes.”

The first responders also highlighted that deteriorating roads have become a pressing concern for the general public. They referenced a recent WPPA poll that found road conditions had surpassed education, local economy, protecting the environment and taxes on a “high priority” list.

They also noted that poor road conditions have led to increased wear and tear on their vehicles and the cost of frequent maintenance was being passed on to taxpayers.

The Joint Committee on Finance is set to take up the Department of Transportation’s budget on Thursday.

See the WPPA survey:

<https://wppa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-Poll-Summary-1.pdf>